DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 523 CS 208 556

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TITLE History 301J, "Research & Writing."
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference (3rd, Columbus, OH, April 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Writing; *Course Content; Course Descriptions; Curriculum Development; Heuristics; Higher Education; *History; *Integrated Curriculum; Teaching Methods; Writing Exercises; Writing for Publication; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes

ABSTRACT

The integration of content area writing instruction into the history curriculum has been a slow process. A history course at Ohio University (Athens) offers students experience in writing the type of materials written by practicing historians: book reviews, journal articles, and articles for encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries. Such short writing assignments are also suited to 10-week academic quarters. The intended audience in the class is the educated, but nonspecialist, reader. Students select a research topic and then pursue it through the quarter, completing each of the genres in relation to their topic. Each piece is critiqued by the instructor, revised, and resubmitted. Grading involves marking of inappropriate grammar, spelling, and other mechanics, as well as noting organization, logic, clarity, and precision in language. This system provides continual writing experience and prompt feedback from the instructor. Most helpful to this class structure is the instructor's knowledge of English composition theory in the area of prewriting and of heuristics systems suggested by composition researchers. Such interdisciplinary efforts, although difficult to accomplish, are necessary if students are to integrate what they have been taught in English courses with the experience of writing in their own disciplines. (HTH)

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HISTORY 301J, "RESEARCH & WRITING"

Although historians always have acknowledged the importance of writing and have tried to incorporate it into their courses through essay exams and term papers, not until recently have historians begun an integration of composition into history courses, making it an integral part of the class. During the last few years the idea of writing across content fields has entered the profession.

This process has been slow. An examination of back issues of the History Teacher, the basic journal devoted to innovative curricular approaches in the field, reveals only a few articles dealing with writing in general as a part of course content and even less in writing across content areas. For example, in 1973 an article appeared describing an attempt to have undergraduates write local history through an examination of primary sources in local repositories.[1] The emphasis was primarily on research techniques and only secondarily on composition. Students, the instructor claimed learned "by direct experience what it is to be an historian." More recent articles (1977 & 1978 respectively) have dealt with more traditional themes: "The Essay Assignment: A Teaching Device," and "Student Reports: How to Increase Their Use and Effectiveness."[2] Only two articles, one in 1979 and the other in 1980, really have dealt with courses in which writing is

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a basic content component. One, "Improving Student Writing Skills in a History Lecture Course," describes a Chinese history course at Berkeley requiring a weekly paper, two or three pages in length, which discussed the major themes in the lectures and readings.[3] Graduate students acted as readers and students were allowed to rewrite their papers as many times as they wished. The other article, "Using Writing to Learn in History," is particularly valuable for writing across content areas because it provides guidelines compatible with current English pedagogical practice.[4] Writing is treated not as a skill but a process consisting of three major components: prewriting, composition, and revision. Writing is frequent with immediate feedback. Students rewrite their papers. Assignments call for several short papers rather than one long term paper. In general, writing is used to improve the study of content.

Yet the picture remains bleak if one examines back issues of Perspectives, the newsletter of the American Historical Association, which since 1974 has had a regular column entitled: "Teaching History Today." Since most historians in the United States are members of this professional association, articles on new teaching techniques reach a larger audience than the History Teacher. Although Perspectives has had articles dealing with a number of currently fashionable topics such as: "Sport History in the Classroom,"[5] "Historical Role Playing: An Alternative Teaching Strategy,"[6] and even "New Perspectives on Using the Library in History Teaching,"[7] only one article has been published dealing with writing and this was a report on a private

secondary school's efforts to combine instruction in reading, writing, and reasoning skills with the teaching of history.[8] In essence while writing across the discipline has surfaced at schools such as the University of Michigan, such curricular practices are appearing only very slowly in the literature of the history profession.

My own efforts at developing such a course began in 1979, under the impetus of two circumstances. First, my own department (like many other history departments) had long been concerned about student research and writing at the undergradute level. I had as part of my own undergraduate experience at Wayne State University an excellent course taught by a history professor, Dr. Milton Covensky, which dealt with the whole topic of research and writing, but focused on the bibliographical aspect--What are the basic reference tools for historians? My department decided to require such a course for all majors, to be taken at the beginning of their junior year. While I taught the basic tools of historical research, I required only one writing assignment, a term paper due at the end of the course, following the pattern of many other history courses. At about that same time, Ohio University began to institute a junior level English composition requirement for all students. While the English department added a number of additional classroom sections, that department encouraged other departments to explore the concept of writing across disciplines by bringing representatives from the University of Michigan to campus to explain their program. Since I had just begun my own research course, I was interested in this new

approach, but I felt I needed more knowledge about teaching composition. I sat in on an English department summer class required of incoming graduate students to prepare them for teaching freshmen composition, taught by Professor David Bergdahl. This course opened up a new perspective into theories of teaching composition. I cannot claim much competency in this field, but I have tried to use some of its techniques.

Let me explain how I set up my course. First, I have wanted students to have experience in writing the type of material done by practicing historians: book reviews, journal articles, and the occasional article for encyclopedias or biographical dictionaries. These are in some ways the "nitty gritty" of the profession and seem fitted for the purpose of short writing assignments that one could expect during a ten week quarter. Since one of the aims of any composition class is to provide experience by writing frequently, I needed such short pieces. They also would allow the student time for ample feedback and rewriting, something that would be more difficult if the goal was a large research project.

The intended audience in the class is the educated, but nonspecialist reader. It is a truism among historians that they unlike other disciplines demand simple, clear, jargon-free English, intelligible to any educated reader. While the reality may be that most professional historians write for other professionals rather than for the general reader, historians would argue that their prose remains intelligible, if too specialized to be

of interest to many readers. Moreover, there are still historians such as Peter Gay who write for a broader audience. Accordingly, I have designated only one audience for the course, the one aimed at by the historical discipline. This has had a side benefit. I encourage students to write on a topic of their own interest. They are free to explore whatever topic, time, or geographical area that fascinates them. As a consequence I have a large number of papers outside of my own expertise. I cannot be expected to be a specialist on topics as varied as the Thirty Years' War, the colonial American judiciary system, and the Waffen SS. I can, however, approach my students' papers as an intelligent, if nonspecialist reader, the audience designated by the course.

Students select a research topic and then pursue it during the course of a quarter. For example, a student might select the Manhattan Project that produced the Atomic Bomb. He or she would begin by reading a book, writing a precis review, having this critiqued by the instructor, then submit a rewritten draft. He would then continue reading and write another review, 700 words in length along the lines of those in the <u>American Historical Review</u>. This too would be evaluated and then rewritten. The student would then produce a biography of one of the figures involved in the Manhattan Project, such as J. Robert Oppenheimer. This too would be rewritten. The next assignment would be an attempt to summarize the entire topic, the encyclopedia article on the Manhattan Project, and this too would be rewritten. For the final paper, the student would focus on a much narrower ques-

tion, something original and significant, that could be answered through the use of primary sources. For example: What security precautions were there in the Manhattan Project and how effective were they? Students thus have been constantly writing and rewriting about their topic. In the final paper they are permitted to use portions of previous papers where appropriate.

The aim of this system is to provide continual writing experience and prompt feedback from the instructor. There is an assignment due on the last day of class each week, Thursday. I spend the weekend grading--to the chagrin of my wife and young daughter, return the papers with written comments on the following Monday, and talk about basic writing problems in class. Students then turn in the rewritten assignment on Thursday and the cycle begins again.

I have handout sheets spelling out each assignment. There is an example of one such assignment, the 700 word review, distributed today. I have discovered that students need to have as precise as possible assignments with the details laid out. My problem with textbooks that deal with writing across content areas is that they must cover a number of different disciplines. Elaine P. Maimon and others' Writing in the Arts and Sciences, is one such example.[9] It has only a couple of assignments appropriate for my particular discipline, namely the critical book review and the term paper.

When I grade, I point out inappropriate grammar, spelling, and other mechanics, but I assume that a writer knows how to cor-

rect these. One of my textbooks is an English handbook, Watkins & Dillingham's Practical English Handbook,[10] and I usually indicate on a student paper that he should read such and such section if he has some major problem. I have discovered that most of my students have a basic grasp of the language. Only one or at most two students each quarter have some real deficiency. They are a problem, because I am not trained as an English teacher. I can only criticize bad writing and suggest ways of improvement. Although I recommend the Academic Advancement Center (Ohio University's program to help students with reading and study skills), I have no way to enforce its use. Such students painfully complete my assignments and inch through the course, but I really am not able to offer them the help they need. I do focus mainly on organization, logic, clarity, and precision in language, problems that I am more prepared to deal with--these are the editing skills possessed by more experienced writers. I do this through written comments on each paper, discussion of common problems in class, and through student conferences.

Let me conclude my brief remarks by saying, although I focus on the whole writing process: prewriting, composition, and revision. I have benefited most from the work of English composition theory in the area of prewriting. I have found helpful for example, various systems of heuristics, such as those suggested by Elaine P. Maimon in Writing in the Arts & Sciences, cited earlier, or Linda Flower's Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing.[11] These help students explore the possibilities of a topic and pose questions that can help provide a focus for further research.

Such techniques offer new possibilities for the history teacher and illustrate the need for greater cross fertilization between the two disciplines. Such interdisciplinary efforts, although difficult to accomplish, are necessary if students are to integrate what they have been taught in English courses with the experience of writing in their own disciplines.

NOTES

[1] Ted L. Underwood, "Undergraduates as Historians: Writing Local History in a Seminar on Historical Research," History Teacher 7, no. 1 (November 1973):18-23.

[2] John F. Mcclymer and Kenneth J. Moynihan, "The Essay Assignment: A Teaching Device," History Teacher 10, no. 3 (May 1977):359-371. James A. Pannin, "Student Reports: How to Increase Their Use and Effectiveness," History Teacher 11, no. 3 (May 1978):361-67.

[3] David N. Keightley, "Improving Student Writing Skills in a History Lecture Course," History Teacher 12, no 2 (February 1979):171-79.

[4] Barry K. Beyer, "Using Writing to Learn in History," History Teacher 13, no. 2 (February 1980):167-78.

[5] Steven A. Riess, "Sport History in the Classroom," AHA Perspectives 20, no. 6 (September 1982):29-30.

[6] Robert S. Feldman, "Historical Role Playing: An Alternative Teaching Strategy," AHA Perspectives 15, no. 8 (November

1977):4-6.

[7] E. A. Reitan, "New Perspectives on Using the Library in History Teaching," AHA PERSPECTIVES 16, no. 4 (April 1978):5-6.

[8] Christine Naitove and Barbara Bartle, "A European History Course that Stresses Writing and Reasoning Skills," AHA Perspectives 21, no. 6 (September 1983):16-21.

[9] Elaine P. Maimon et al., Writing in the Arts and Sciences (Cambridge, Mass.: Winthrop Publishers, 1981).

[10] Floyd C. Watkins and William B. Dillingham, Practical English Handbook, 6th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982).

[11] Linda Flower, Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).